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Stella

It was a very harsh winter, the winter of 1940, the first year of the war. After the golden Polish autumn the winter frost came early and suddenly. Thick snow covered the streets of my native city of Lodz. Lodz, let's face it, is an ugly city, a city without a river, without history or cultural tradition. The tall chimneys of the textile mills exhaled tons of dirty and heavy smoke into the always overcast skies. A chauvinistic Lodzer called the city "the Polish Manchester" to give it some international luster. Lodz's native poet, Julian Tuvim, (who spent most of his life in Warsaw) found a peculiar grace in its ugliness and declared, in his " Ode to Lodz", "I love your bad beauty." Ha, bad beauty- only a poet could express such highly charged feelings, blinded by love for his birthplace. For us the city was charmless, unhealthy and provincial, a mere periphery of Warsaw.

I met Stella in school in the first autumn of war. We were thirteen years old, starting the first class of Gymnasium. Stella was a tall, slim girl; the right side of her white, unblemished by acne face was distorted by a muscle twitch which appeared once in a long while, like a breeze on calm waters. The tic attracted attention to the uniqueness of the face adorned by oriental eyes seldom seen in Poland. The eyes must have been genetic remnants of the Tatars invasion of Poland many centuries ago and were handed down to her by her mother. Stella was a well developed young girl going into womanhood in a very gracious way. The exotic, slant eyes were friendly and smiling.

I was an only child, a loner by nature, not ready and yet very eager for friendships. Our friendship started haphazardly for we lived in a ghetto, in buildings divided by a large courtyard and it was easy to visit Stella after the curfew ordered by the Germans.

Stella's family of four was forced by the Nazis to move to one room which in better times served as a kitchen. Already food was rationed and I was constantly hungry. Hunger changed us,our bodies and our feelings. If misery likes company, then the cold of the winter was hunger's best companion. Stella and I stopped menstruating and our bodies assumed an angular shape of a not-a-girl and not-a-boy silhouette.

"Sally ," demanded Stella," we must never talk of food.(talking of food was the favorite pastime during the war) It makes us weaker, it makes us dumb. It's an empty talk since what can be said about food if it's not present on the table. Instead let's read the poetry of Tuvim ."

She didn't try to read with me the Romantics of the nineteen century which we had to study in school. Their oh's and ah's of unrequited romantic love were fine, not too exciting, but OK on a full stomach. Even the love for the Fatherland, expressed exuberantly in their poems, sounded artificial. Maybe because the Polish poets of the Romantic era wrote it a century before, in exile, in their nice apartments in Paris and Rome and not under the Nazi occupation, in the ugly city of Lodz.

But Tuvim, a modern poet and writer, struck a responsive chord in us because his poetry had the juices of real life. The love in his poems was a blend of happiness and torment, a sensual love which increased the beat of our young hearts. The wind in his poem was not a zephyr but a hard blowing wind, a wind of change. In his knife-sharp poetry Tuvim described the prewar corruption and the racial injustice in Poland. The sorrow of being a Jew "Judenschmertz" was ever present in his verses, as if he felt that he was condemned to remain forever a permanent foreign body in the Polish society.

And so Stella transformed the former kitchen into a magic, literary salon and after reading Tuvim's poetry she showed me stars, trees, flowers on the frozen window. Or she painted faces. The portraits frightened me and reminded me of Goya-like paintings of the victims of the war.

Stella's domestic situation was bad. In the cramped, small room her hungry father changed into a madman. But we never discussed our parents and our struggles at home. As Stella would have said: "It weakens more than hunger."

In the spring Stella decided that we must fall in love. We were teenagers, hunger heightened our emotions and the balmy weather changed even the ugly city of Lodz. And although our sexuality was pallid - the sex hormones were not produced in our thin, fat depleted bodies-love was in the air. Naturally Stella choose the candidate of our affection.

"Sally," she said," he's not very handsome, but it's too easy anyway to fall for a good looking boy. Sal is interesting."

Interesting?! Not very handsome?! Sal was a small, red-headed boy, who avoided us like a plague.

"Why not Aaron, Stella, the beautiful, tall, blue-eyed Aaron?"

But I should have known better, for Stella always found hidden charm in the most unexpected places: a swan neck on a shapeless body, a lovely smile on a plain face, a non-ending list of small wonders to which I was blind. Our "love" for the freckled boy lasted one summer and left him in a state of exhaustion and bewilderment.

"Sally" Stella asked in the fall, "What would you like to do after the war?"

"To eat six or more scrambled eggs or, wait...six slices of bread covered with lard or..."

"Here you go again dreaming only of food. I am asking what do you want to do with your life, **your life**, Sally!?"

I made no answer, I felt the smell of scrambled eggs in my nostrils and I couldn't think of anything else.

That year the school was closed and didn't never open again. The children of the lower race didn't need an education. And bad news started to follow. The most popular girl in our school, the beautiful and bright Kristina, died of typhoid fever.

"We must go and visit her mother," concluded Stella "Kristina was her only child and she must be in despair. We should involve more girls to help her since Kristina had many friends. Her presence brightened up our classroom, she was such a rare combination of talent and beauty. Her mother may need us."

We found her address and we entered an almost empty room. In the corner Kristina's friend, Maya, was sitting on a high stool wearing what seemed to be Kristina's dress and she was watching a woman who sat at the table and looked like a very old Kristina. We approached the mother to introduced ourselves when Maya started to scream, "Go out of this apartment. We don't need your pity. Out, out!"
The mother gave us a furious look and together they pushed us out of the room.
I was devastated, humiliated and between the sobs I yelled at Stella.

"You and your crazy ideas. It's a war, Stella, thousands die every day and nobody but nobody goes on condolence visits. You're unreal with your humanistic ideas, your poetry reading, painting, running after an ugly boy in the midst of a mass killing."
I saw the little twitch appearing on her quiet face.

"Sally, OK. Return to you dreams of scrambled eggs and soon you'll look like my father. (It was the very first time she mentioned her father) You don't see that there was something strange in that house. The mother had a glassy look in her eyes and she acted like a marionette in Maya's hands. "

The second winter of the war was a winter of hunger, cold and disease. I ran through the empty courtyard to see Stella but she was in bed each time. "To conserve energy," she explained. Sitting in the chair and keeping my legs in bed, covered by a thick blanket I immersed myself in reading, serving at the same time as a model for Stella's

drawings. There was no fire in the oven and the water in the pipes had turned into ice. And my round, smooth teen- aged face in Stella's portrait changed, to a triangular, almost cadaveric face of a person of an uncertain age. "Ugly" I said to my own face.

One evening Stella declared that she is in love with Richard, a sixteen years old boy she met ("Where, Stella?"I asked but I met an impatient look in her Tatar eyes) who lived with his parents not far from Stella's house. Now every night I got a full description of their secret meetings. I was enchanted by their witty and interesting conversation and a jealousy crept in. Why she didn't share with me the object of her love? Didn't we, together, follow the little boy that I truly disliked? I was now a marginal figure in Stella's life, but I came faithfully every night listen to a new chapter of her love, a young love in a God forsaken place, in the ugliest part of the ugly city of Lodz under the bestial Nazi occupation.

I never pressed hard for facts ("When do you see him?") for I knew that Stella rarely left the bed. I loved the story of the teen-age love between two beautiful, talented and intelligent youngsters. The story came to an abrupt end at the beginning of the spring when the boy supposedly left Lodz and went to Warsaw. Thus Stella created, introduced and ended an imaginary romance into our ghetto existence.
I don't remember the spring or summer of 1942 very well-so many people around us died of starvation, tuberculosis or typhoid. We were both working in a factory and our "salad" days were over. Stella now made straw-shoes for German soldiers suffering from cold on the eastern front and she always found time to make little straw figures, miniatures scarecrows somehow resembling us. We had less and less time to see each other and Stella came with a new idea. "We must write a diary and we'll exchange our writing every week".

My diary, in its erratic entries, contained all dry facts of the day and food was its main theme. My "creative" forces centered around "ersatz" coffee mixed with brown sugar to form a cake. Scrambled eggs were an unreachable dream. Stella's diary was

full of her naive poetry, plans for the future "to survive, to let the world know what happened to us. " In her pages the "unspeakable" changed into the "write-able", a portrait of her father, who was stealing food from his wife and children; a loving tribute to her mother, who protected the children from the hungry-mad father. For the first time I discovered the inner turmoil of Stella who observed her father's moral decline, which was even deeper than his physical deterioration. The exchange of diaries showed me a hungry Stella who made an enormous effort to escape into the world of books, art and fantasy games.

One sunny day in the fall of 1942 Stella came to see me. For the first time I saw her crying and the once charming tic was now like an electric current running through her wet cheek.

"Sally, Gestapo took my mother and brother."

I looked at my friend who was then barely sixteen years old. She had fought hunger and despair for two long years; a teenager who saw a garden full of frozen flowers on the window, a friend who gave me, a much lesser person, a lesson of survival. Without thinking I said,

"Stella, now you must be on your own."

She stared at me in silence and left. Why I didn't take her in my arms and say, " You are not alone. Come stay with us."

It is true that I was hiding with my parents to avoid deportation and a hunted animal is absorbed with his own survival. But the explanation is not good enough to alleviate the pain which has stayed with me all my life. The expression "pain" is inaccurate, it is a thought which wakes me up sometimes in the middle of the night or suddenly creeps in during my daily procedures. I feel then like the subhuman I was in the fall of 1942 and all the achievements in my later life turn into nothingness.

The next day Stella gave herself up to Gestapo and never came back, suffocated in a mobile van that used its own exhaust gases, in a little known extermination camp of

Chelmno.

I saw Stella on the streets of Lodz, in every tram, cart or bus. My fantasy was running amok, I saw her giving me signals, "Meet me after the war, Sally."

Stella could have been a poet, a writer, an artist , a housewife, a mother. Nothing is left, not her drawings, not her diary, not her poetry. Only my memory.

But as long as my memory serves me, Stella is still alive.